DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 869 CG 014 820

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TITLE A Professional Employee Counseling Program: Credibility Issues.
PUB DATE Sep 80
NOTE 8p.: Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (88th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, September 1-5, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Responsibility; Codes of Ethics; *Counseling Services; *Credibility; Employee Attitudes; *Employees; Employer Employee Relationship; Fringe Benefits; *Mental Health Programs; *Need Gratification; Outreach Programs; *Program Development; Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS *Well Being

ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the increasing number of employee counseling programs and the critical issues underlying their credibility. The history and current services of an employee counseling program at Citibank are briefly reviewed. The critical issues for credibility include: (1) a program appropriate to the structure and needs of the organization; (2) a code of ethics; (3) outreach efforts such as employee education and supervisory orientation activities; (4) staff qualities and skills; and (5) a "mental wellness" approach, which focuses on the maintenance of adaptive functioning and prevention of serious problems. (NRB)

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A PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEE COUNSELING PROGRAM: CREDIBILITY ISSUES

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CG 014820

Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Conference, September 1980, Montreal, Canada.

A PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEE COUNSELING PROGRAM: CREDIBILITY ISSUES

The industrial setting has in recent years been gaining recognition as an area for clinicians providing mental health-related services. For a number of reasons, both economic, legal, and humane, employee counseling programs have come of age. The trend toward professionally-staffed comprehensive programs is increasing, and as such mental health professionals are being recruited to administer and/or provide services to many of these programs.

Underlying this wave of enthusiasm lurks occasional ambivalence. Although there is a general recognition of the importance of fostering mental wellness for employees, there can still be ambivalence about the credibility of in-house counseling programs. Some programs have shown themselves to be lacking in credibility, either for reasons ranging from haphazard administration by program staff, use of inappropriate procedures to doubts over the program's ethics regarding confidentiality.

Although program models may differ (and should differ) from company to company in types of services provided, procedures used, staffing patterns, and physical locale (Medical Department or Personnel), there does exist basic critical issues underlying a credible counseling program.

For psychologists who relish working within an organizational climate and/or who are presently involved in a program or hope to be, this paper will review a few of these critical issues.

Before proceeding with a discussion of these issues, I'd like to briefly review the history and present services of an employee counseling program that I manage at Citibank.

Citibank is the second largest commercial bank in the world and it is the principal asset of Citicorp, a world-wide financial services company. In 1971, a pilot program to assist staff members with personal problems was created under the Staff Relations Division, a part of Corporate Personnel at Citibank. Called Staff Advisory Service, the program was originally directed to assist Citibank's large non-managerial work-force located in an operations center, one of the headquarters in NYC. The services provided then were primarily information and referral. The major problems dealt with were financial, family, child-care, housing, and legal concerns. Program staff were recruited from within the organization and trained on the job and unit managers were personnel specialists.

SAS has evolved over the years to meet the changing needs of the clients, the organization, as well as to mirror the changes that have developed in the employee counseling sphere. At present, SAS has developed into a comprehensive professionally-staffed assistance program offering counseling, consultation, and adjunct support services to all active and retired NY metropolitan staff members at all levels of the organization. The services are now available at 3 major headquarters, and a telephone hot line service is provided to other domestic and international staff. The present staff includes 2 licensed psychologists, and 2 full-time highly trained counselors.

Our counseling services address the major non-job related non-medical personal problem areas including but not limited to the following: marital, legal, family, housing, consumer, pre-retirement and distress reactions. We help employees recognize and manage life-disrupting problems. We also offer practical help with everyday life concerns. The counseling offered is short-term model, crisis-oriented, and supportive, and information and referrals are offered as needed.

We also provide consulting services to all levels of management for a broad range of personal problems impacting the work area. We conduct orientation presentations to managers on the identification of behavioral symptoms that may indicate staff with personal problems and we describe appropriate referral procedures to SAS.

We also spend time on employee education. We organize seminars, workshops on life planning activities (eg. pre-retirement, parenting) and highlight quality of life topics in in-house publications.

As much as we can, we attempt to complement other personnel programs. Citibank has an extensive human resource program, including personnel initiatives as career development, out-placement, job-related counseling, affirmative action, medical care, organizational training and development, etc. Our program makes a unique contribution, in that it provides a method for disentangling employee personal problems from other personnel, medical concerns. But by its services and activities, it attempts to coordinate with the other personnel functions.

Since its inception in 1971 to June 80, SAS has helped 9079 individuals. Staff members utilizing SAS can range from senior VP to lowest level clerk. In terms of occupational title, officers and non-officers use SAS in proportion equal to their representation in the workforce. Minorities and women tend to use SAS in larger proportion than their representation.

SAS has a written code of ethics governing procedures, staff conduct, and confidentiality.

Having summarized the evolution of Citibank's counseling service, let's review the critical issues.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

As previously stated, there are different models of in-house employee counseling programs. Some models are concerned solely with substance abuse, others provide information/referral services for a complex array of personel problems. Some other programs also provide in-house treatment services, in addition to information and referral services. Some programs are located in the Medical Departments, others are housed in personnel divisions. No one model is appropriate in all situations, the same as one treatment approach may not be appropriate for all patients. One of the critical issues in developing a credible program involves designing a program that can be integrated and coordinated within an organization. A program for it to be effective, needs to be seen as complementary to the other human resource services that exist in a specific organization. The model chosen should be based on its appropriateness to the structure and needs of an organization, rather than on the personal and professional biases of those developing the program.

ETHICS

As a program model is tailored to the structure and needs of an organization, a code of ethics should be developed and tailored for the program model. The cornerstone of a credible in-house program lies in it being thought of as a place of trust. Violations of trust will destroy a program faster and more decisively than any thing else. Although trust does take time to develop, it is critical that programs staff take a proactive stance regarding their ethics. The early development of a code of ethics, often serves a preventative function, in that potential conflict of interest, catch 22's situations regarding balancing needs of management with needs of employees can be avoided or at least reduced when everybody concerned is aware of the programs ethical policies.

While it is beyond the scope of this presentation to address all the issues involved in developing and adhering to a code of ethics, this paper will highlight certain key points. (For those readers who desire a more extensive discussion of ethical issues in employee counseling programs, the writer recommends

reading Dr. Steven Narwold's paper on Ethical Consideration in the Provision and Management of Industrial Mental Health Programs-Chapter in Boston University-Washington Business Group On Health (Eds) Employee Mental Wellness Programs, Springer-Verlag Series.)

Staff responsible for the accountability of a program should consult with professional organizations as well as their corporate counsel in the development of a code of ethics. The code should include principles similar to the American Psychological Association's ethical standards but made specific to the occupational clinical setting. The code should include the program's policy and procedures concerning confidentiality. Principles regarding the limits of confidentiality, status and access of program records, limits on collection of information, and release of information to internal and external sources should be discussed. In addition, the code should make explicit principles on program staff's conduct, responsibility and competence.

Once a code is developed it should be clearly set forth in written form. Management should be made aware of the ethical guidelines. Direct recipients of the program services should be given a verbal statement about the program's policy on confidentiality. Program staff should be expected to adhere to the code and they should be made aware that job disciplinary action follow any violations of the code.

OUTREACH EFFORTS

Outreach efforts include employee education and supervisory orientation activities. No matter how well-designed and ethical a counseling program may be, if employees refuse to recognize the existence of a problem and fail to seek help and supervisors do not use job performance to identify and refer troubled staff members, the counseling program will not be effectively utilized.

To be effective and credible, professionals staffing a program cannot remain solely reactive, waiting for clients to come to them. The counseling staff needs to be actively engaged in educating,orientating and consulting activities. These activities have a number of interrelated goals including: heightening awareness of and removing stigma from mental wellness, encouraging staff to recognize early signs of problem and promoting early detection and early self and/or supervisory referrals.

The varieties of outreach efforts include distributing brochures on program services, publishing articles in in-house organs on mental health related topics, organizing life-style seminars and workshops, providing orientations and training sessions to management helping them to identify early warning signs in job performance that may indicate personal problems and training them in the appropriate referral procedures.

In these outreach activities with management, it is critical that program staff communicate the interrelationship between the humanistic values and business values. It is not advisable for management to see a counseling program as another human resource fad, or as solely a do-good operation. Management needs to understand the direct relationship between human and business goals, that is if a person is helped in coping with personal problems, their effectiveness in their job will be either maintained, restored or enhanced.

STAFFING

The staff of a employee counseling program needs both the professional competence and personal qualities to function effectively. Specific skills obviously depend upon the needs of the program. However certain skills/qualities cut across program models.

Staff should have a highly developed sense of professionalism and maturity. It is important to keep in mind that although much of the work in the in-house corporate program may be similar to the work in outside traditional mental health settings, the total working environment in a corporation is not a mental health environment. To be effective in this environment involves more than training and experience in diagnoses and treatment. Staff has to be familiar with the workings of a corporate environment, its unique stressors, procedures, and politics, jargon. For when someone is working within a corporate organization, they are not only passive observers, they are active participants and in fact they are employees. Staff needs not only the appropriate clinical skills but they also need the sensitivity and maturity to work within a organizational structure.

Regardless of program model, there should be at least one member of the counseling team (either on full-time, part-time or consultant basis) who is a certified mental health professional. This person should provide the supervision, training, and be held accountable for adherance to ethical standards. No staff should be allowed to provide services unless they are trained and/or well-supervised in the provision of these services.

MENTAL WELLNESS APPROACH

The concept of mental health/illness has generally involved a focus on absence/presence of pathology and the emphasis has been on treatment (often long-term) for the "very troubled". Although the illness model is still applicable in many situations and settings, the wellness model has become widely recognized, and is the primary focus in most employee counseling programs.

This mental wellness approach involves an appreciation of quality of life issues and an appreciation of an individual's sense of well-being and ability to adapt effectively in the face of psychosocial stressors. The focus of this approach is on maintanence of adaptive functioning and prevention of more serious problems in a large group of people called the "worried well".

This new focus has already been incorporated in the DSM III with the expansion of the diagnostic descriptions to include assessment, adaptative functioning and severity of psychosocial stressors.

Employee counseling programs tend to see the worried well in greater numbers than the very troubled. The primary reason is because the potential clients are for the most part productive employees, who however troubled they may be by personal problems, still have the ego-strength to work.

Included in this wellness model is a non-paternalistic/non-maternalistic approach toward employees. Specifically the goals in most counseling programs are to assess an individual's ego-strength and coping abilities, assist in developing a problem solving plan and supporting and encouraging self-responsibility and discouraging passive-dependency.

This focus of stressing wellness, prevention, maintanence, enhancement, helps in reducing the stigma surrounding the concept of mental health and lessens the resistance toward seeking help. All this enhances the overall credibility of an employee counseling program serving as a prevention center for the worried well-- preventing them from becoming the very ill.

Mental health promotion and prevention activities are well-established in corporate America. There are tremendous potentials for creative programs along with opportunities for mental health professionals. However, credibility, is an issue that has to be considered as one component in the success of any effort.